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ABSTRACT

Influenced by film and television exposure, the student designer tends to be camera oriented and two-dimensional in creating theatrical sets. This paper outlines six visual projects designed to help students develop a selective visual sense for dealing with the three-dimensional aspects of the stage. The projects include the following activities: selecting scenery elements that tell as much about the play as possible; creating a collage that communicates the dramatic structure and atmosphere, the drama type, and the character relationships involved in a chosen play; working with an indoor-outdoor set to achieve effective movement patterns; matching setting to dialogue in a scale model of a one-act play; designing a floor plan and model for "Macbeth" in a nontechnological cultural setting; and translating concept into reality through the scale construction of a one-setting modern play design. (MAI)

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A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE SCENE DESIGN

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A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE SCENE DESIGN

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Undergraduates enrolling in their first scene design course bring with them a dramatic visual sense based on their massive exposure to cinema and television. Their camera-oriented selectivity as to what to show the audience dramatically is well developed. The problem arises when undergraduates try to apply this camera-oriented visual sense to the theatrically limited space of the theatre. The undergraduates must, for the first time, restrict their dramatic visual experience to a single space without benefit of a recording camera to select and focus attention.

As the beginning designer reads a play for which he is to design his first setting, he visualizes the action in a series of camera shots. After reading the play, he must piece these pans, close-ups, and zoom shots into the static space of a theatre's stage area. The end result is something short of a Hollywood back lot property shop.

The job of the theatrical design teacher is to cut through the camera-oriented, two dimensional, visual experience of the student to establish a theatrically selective three dimensional visual sense which is reconcilable to the stage space in which the new design student must start to work. This forming of a theatrical design sense must start with a visually restricted crash diet. The formidable visual weight that the massive frame of cinema and television supports cannot be transferred pound-by-pound to the aesthetically trim frame of the theatrical stage.

Following are a series of six visual projects designed to cut through camera-oriented visual experiences and establish a new theatrically selective visual sense that will aid the development of a scenic designer for the theatre.

Project I: Making the scenery speak.

The student should present to the class from photographs and paintings one architectural element, one set prop, one hand prop, and one light source. In addition, the student may describe one movement of a lone actor on stage and one sound. All elements are to be imagioned in front of a black surround.

The class must, given the above information about an imaginary play, deduce the following: the general mood of the play, the specific mood of the scene described, the geographic location, the period, the season, the time of day or night, the social, political, and economical condition.

From this project the student should:

gain a broader knowledge of what visual information exists in the library;

select elements that tell as much about the play as possible;

demonstrate his ability to communicate visually a complete dramatic environment.

Project II: Reading the scenery (See page 7, Ill. 1 and 2)

The student should be paired off with another student. These two students should present to the class a two or three-dimensional collage based on a play selected by the teacher. The title of this play

should be known by the teacher and the two students. At the time of presentation, the two students are allowed to say nothing. The other class members, given the collage as evidence, must arrive at the type of play, dramatic structure, major character relationships and general dramatic atmosphere.

From this project, the student should:

become aware of the literal power of the image or symbol;

gain a greater understanding of the relationship between playwright's message and the scenic message;

demonstrate their ability to translate their interpretation of a play in abstracted form to a unified visual object (the collage).

Project III: Indoor-outdoor shorthand.

The student should present to the class a floor plan and visual research materials to properly set the scene for a theatre-in-the-round production of the following scene.

The stage area is divided into a garden area and an adjoining living room of an upper-middle class banker in a medium-sized city. As the scene opens, the husband is reading a newspaper. The phone rings and the wife answers it. The ensuing scene is a violent argument between wife and husband. The action takes place in both the garden and living-room area.

The student must:

set the geographic location of this play;

select the style of the living room, garden and furniture to illustrate the personalities of the people involved.

From this project, the student should:

demonstrate an awareness of interior decoration source books,

gain an insight into the scenic restrictions that arena staging imposes;

begin to develop an understanding of effective movement patterns through the placement of set props;

begin to develop basic drafting techniques and a sense of scenographic notation.

Project IV: Matching the setting to the dialogue:

The student, having been provided with a scale model of a standard thrust theatre, should present a scale model of a setting based on a published one-act play. In addition, the student should present a scale floor plan and most importantly, a collage of color, texture, and pattern that he feels clearly represents the emotional, social, moral, and physical qualities of the one-act selected.

From this project, the student should:

experience a deeper awareness of theatrical design as a three-dimensional design form;

become aware of the potential effectiveness of hard scenery (flats, etc.);

illustrate in abstract form the dramatic essence

existing inherently in the dialogue.

Project V: New concepts for old scripts. (See pages 8, 9; Ill. 3, 4 & 5)

The student will present a model for Shakespeare's "Macbeth." Also, a presentation of a floor plan would be necessary. This model should derive its design concept by having the action take place in a non-technological culture other than Great Britain of the time of "Macbeth." Primitive cultures would be acceptable. The total design must be of a static unit or platformed setting. Only furniture may be moved on or off the stage.

From this project, the student should:

extract the driving primitive forces in "Macbeth" and apply these forces to another culture;

be able to adapt non-technological, aesthetic, architectural structures to dramatic unit elements in the scene design;

demonstrate the ability to come up with innovative arrangements of units that would facilitate the quick taking on and off of set props.

Project VI: Concept reality (the bond on which all scenic design depends).

The student will submit a modern one setting play for approval. When approved, the student will design the setting in the form of a scale model which conforms to the format of a standard procenium theatre. In addition, the student will submit a floor plan, construction drawings of one major scenic element, one cross-section and one

painter's elevation.

From this project, the student should:

demonstrate the ability to translate concept into reality in the form of scale construction;

gain a greater understanding of how the planning and construction of scenery are coordinated to produce the final product;

be able to foresee problems with the design and in a creative way develop solutions.

Cutting through the camera-oriented, two-dimensional visual experience of the student to establish a theatrically selective three-dimensional visual sense is the first and most important step in the development of a young designer. This step can be made with ease using a planned course of study starting with the most basic theatrical elements. Building systematically upon these basic elements with the tools of imagination, technical skills, model building, and clear-cut explanations of conceptualization will add to the successful maturing of the young designer.

Photo by Brian Stoppe

Ill. 1

Collage for Sophoclese's "Electra"

A white platform covered with white paper and red fish net. Red drops of blood speckle the white. A string of amber lights is woven through the entire collage.

Ill. 2

Collage for Becket's "End Game"

Using a gray painted trash can as a base, the students have connected two white shapes with black and red crepe paper and white wire. Attached to the shapes are a pair of blind man's glasses, a yo yo, a dog collar, picture post card, a police whistle, red yarn, and saw dust.

Photo by Brian Stoppe

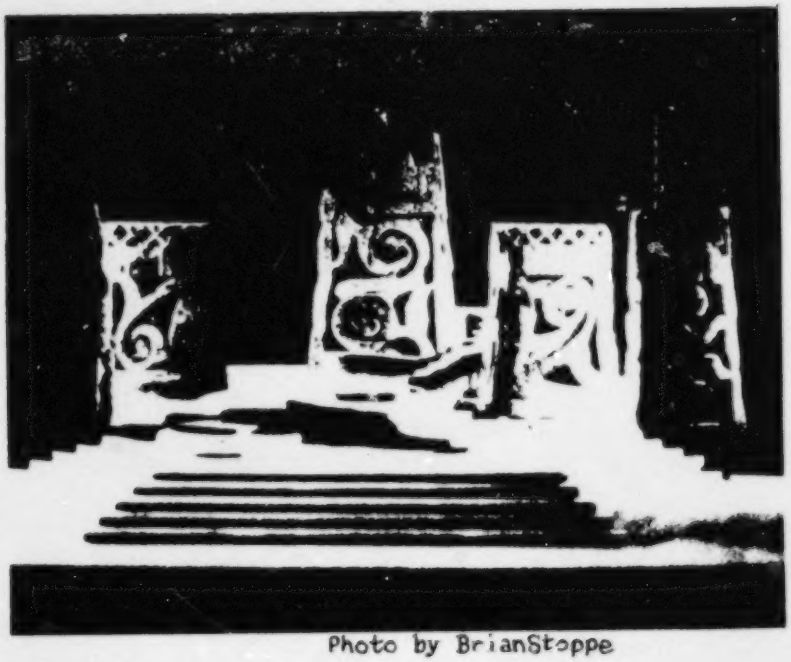

Photo by BrianStoppe

A Celtic "MacBeth" by Debnora Klens

Ill. 5

Note the use of celtic decoration and ornamentation.

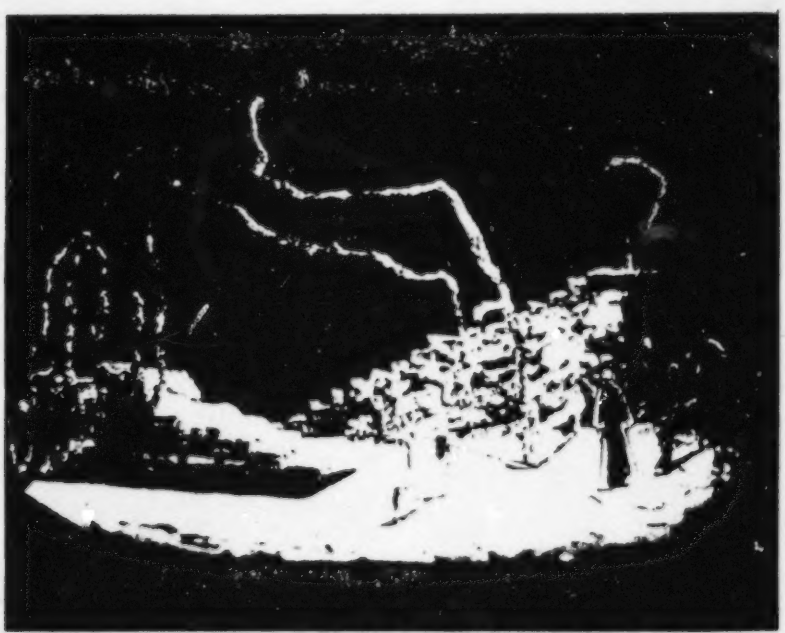

Photo by Brian Stoppe

An Iron Age "MacBeth" by Pat Henry

Ill. 4

Note the use of twisted, rusted metal and primitive craftsmanship in connecting elements of metal together.

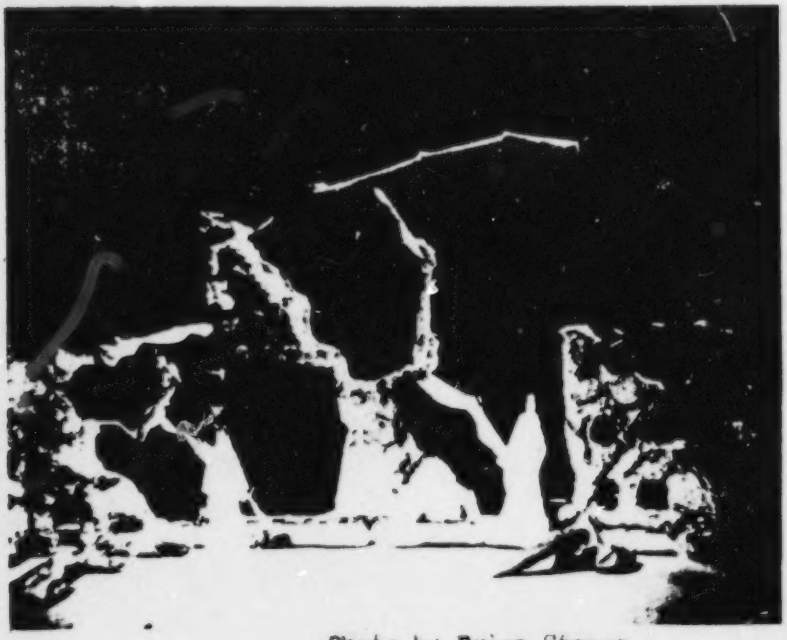

Photo by Brian Stoppe

Ill. 5

Note the use of twisted girders and vine-covered rubble.

After the Third World War "MacBeth" by Robin Quinn